

Louisiana's top drug dogs face off

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JACKSON — Forty-one of the state's top narcotics detection dogs nosed their way through a maze of cast-off furniture Friday, trying to "score" enough dope to win their handlers a trophy.

Looking like a surplus property rummage sale, the floor of a large room in the Jackson Civic Center held desks, file cabinets, clothes lockers, beds, couches, doctor's examining tables, a tractor, a sport utility vehicle and three four-wheelers.

Hidden in seemingly random locations through the collection were seven small bundles of marijuana and six small bundles of cocaine.

The narcotics-detection teams entered in the competition represented most of the state's adult prisons, several State Police troops, the Jackson Police Department, and Tangipahoa and Webster sheriff's offices.

Watched by four judges and a timer, each team had just three minutes to search the area for drugs. Most of the teams were unable to cover all of the search area in the allotted time, however.

The judges awarded a team 50 points for sniffing out a marijuana packet and 100 points for each cocaine discovery during the three-minute interval.

"The handler has to call the 'alert' when the dog finds something. A 'false alert' costs them 150 points," Dixon Correctional Institute Assistant Warden James R. Stevens said.

A trained drug dog makes his handler aware of the presence of contraband by barking, scratching at the location, poking his nose at the spot or sometimes by just sitting still.



Allen Correctional Center security officer Dustin Clifton's dog, Buddy, expresses tail-wagging interest in a doctor's examining table during Friday's competition for narcotics detection teams in Jackson. A small amount of drugs had been hidden in the table.

A few of the "stash"es remained undetected, including some marijuana hidden in the conical base of an old barber's chair.

Dixon and Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola were hosts for this year's competition, which was preceded by two days of training.

Lt. Col. John Smith of DCI said the teams spent Wednesday on the grounds of East Louisiana State Mental Health System in Jackson for training and certification by the National Police Canine Association and the National Narcotics Detection Dog Association.

On Thursday, the teams traveled to Angola to practice searching for drugs in an unused prison camp and a series of vehicles, Smith said.

In Friday's competition, Bobby Toler of Winn Correction Center and his dog, Iko, took first place with 500 points, followed by Jason Allen and his dog, Arras, of DCI with 450 points.

The next three contestants all scored 400 points, but Sherri Dewitt and the dog, Pa'Joo, of Phelps Correctional Center took the third-place award because their first alert came after only seven seconds.

Jamey Norsworthy of DCI was fourth with a first-alert time of 9.93 seconds, while Robert Tycker of Angola won fifth place with his dog's first discovery coming at 12.5 seconds.

Angola's Summer Slater won the sportsmanship plaque, while Jace LaCaze and his dog, Terri, took the award for top rookie team.

Tycker, last year's winner, said prison inmates hide smuggled drugs "in any way imaginable," including inside coffee cans with coffee on top to disguise the scent, in sugar packets, electrical receptacles and even flower beds.